



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

HOUSING CONDITIONS IN JERSEY CITY

By MARY BUELL SAYLES

Fellow of the College Settlements Association

The housing of the working people in Jersey City presents few striking or distinctive features. There are in the crowded parts of the city no such alley-intersected or narrow back street districts as are found in certain sections of Chicago and Philadelphia; there is no block which presents such conspicuously bad conditions of overcrowded land areas, and consequently deficient lighting and ventilation, as prevail throughout the newer tenement house districts of New York. None the less the evils of construction of sanitary neglect and of overcrowded living quarters, which have been brought to light in the recently completed investigation upon which the present article is based, are of a character both to claim the interest of specialists and to compel the attention of citizens.

In his report on housing conditions and tenement laws in leading American cities, Mr. Veiller, then secretary of the New York Tenement House Commission of 1900, notes but four cities, out of the twenty-seven which he discusses, as having a tenement house problem. Among these is Jersey City. Yet compared with the situation in New York, the Jersey City tenement house problem is still in its early stages. The great mass of the working class population is housed either in converted dwellings or in tenement houses of the primitive type commonly erected here, as in Manhattan, twenty to forty years ago; and these two classes of houses, which in the great city have been rapidly giving way, during the last generation, before the onslaught of the dumb-bell tenement with its characteristic eighteen-inch wide air-shaft and overcrowded lot, in the smaller city show few signs of a similar yielding of place. Very few tenements are at present in process of erection, and so few built within the last five or even ten years were found in the districts investigated, that it is difficult to speak with certainty of present tendencies in construction. It is, therefore, chiefly to evils long fixed upon the community and grown so familiar as to be generally overlooked, that attention has been directed—evils none the less serious for this fact, and all the more difficult to eradicate.

The investigation upon which, as has been said, the present paper is based, was necessarily very limited in scope, as it was undertaken single-handed and, under the conditions of the College Settlements Association fellowship, confined to a single academic year. Five hundred houses having been decided upon as a reasonable estimate of the field which could and should be covered, three districts were selected as representative both of the worst and—hardly less important—of average housing conditions. Seventeen blocks in all were investigated. Of these the investigation of the first was largely experimental, as it was undertaken before the printing of the regular schedules used later on, and its results, though hardly less complete than those afterwards obtained, are not in all respects uniform with them, and have therefore, for the present, been set aside. It is then with the returns from sixteen blocks, consisting of the records of five hundred and four houses,¹ and of two thousand one hundred and fifty-four apartments,² that we shall deal in this paper.³

Of the three districts, the first and largest includes the eight blocks bounded by Sussex and Essex and by Van Vorst and Hudson streets, together with two others adjoining, extending between Hudson and Greene to Grand, and between Van Vorst and Warren to Dudley street. The widest range of conditions, as might be expected from its relative size, is to be found in this district. From the comfortable well-built dwellings of Sussex street, only recently converted to tenement house uses, and still in a large proportion of cases unaltered, to the four and five story brick tenements and the huddled rear houses of Morris and Essex streets, every type and grade of house is represented. The population of the district is overwhelmingly foreign. Only 18 per cent of the 1,278 families interviewed were of American stock, while in some of the blocks south of Morris street the percentage falls as low as 11 per cent.

¹ Entrance to nine houses within these blocks was prevented by owners—seven of the houses belonging to one person. While the Board of Health badge was worn by the investigator, no actual authority was conferred therewith, so that entrance to houses or apartments could not be insisted upon.

² These 2,154 apartments make up 98 per cent of all occupied apartments in the houses investigated. In the case of a few of the remaining apartments, information was refused by tenants; in most cases, however, the apartments were not investigated because tenants could not be found at home during the day, neighbors stating that they were absent regularly at work.

³ A very few apartments were occupied by two families; hence the slightly greater number of families than of apartments covered.

The foreign elements most largely represented are the Polish and Russian, who together lead with 28 per cent; the Germans who follow with 20 per cent, and the Irish with 18 per cent. Twenty other nationalities are represented, but as the most numerous, the Jewish, is represented by but thirty-two families, no one of them forms an important element numerically in the population.

The industrial attractions which have brought together this foreign population are not far to seek. The great American Sugar Refinery looms conspicuously on the southern boundary of the district; numerous other factories and workshops are interspersed through the blocks; while to the north, within a few minutes' walk, lies the Pennsylvania Railroad, and to the south, across a narrow strip of water, stretch the docks of the Central Railroad of New Jersey. The foreign population shows, as was to be expected, a heavy preponderance of factory hands, railroad employees, and longshoremen.

The second district includes the two blocks bounded by Railroad avenue and Morgan street and by Henderson and Warren streets, and another adjoining, extending between Provost and Henderson to Bay street. Bounded to the south by the Pennsylvania Railroad's elevated tracks, stretching out toward the Erie Railroad, and hedged in towards the Hudson by factories, foundries and workshops, it offers to the immigrant almost the same inducements of employment as does District I, and presents an even larger percentage of foreign-born inhabitants. Of the 506 families whose apartments were investigated, not quite 14 per cent were Americans, 42 per cent were Polish, 18 per cent Irish, 13 per cent Italians and 4 per cent Germans. Among the remaining families the Jewish lead, numbering 16.

The houses of this district correspond with the older and more neglected portion of District I, showing, however, a larger proportion of wooden buildings and a smaller proportion of high tenements.

District III, consisting of the three blocks bounded by First and Second and by Monmouth and Marseles streets, is located farther from the business centre of the city and from the water front, near the foot of the hill on which are situated most of the better-class resident districts. It lies in the heart of what is known as Little Italy—the most distinctively national section of the city, and the most dilapidated and neglected. Sixty-five per cent of the

377 families interviewed were Italians, and their manner of packing themselves solidly where once they enter into possession gives to the southern half of the district, with the blocks adjoining, an intensely foreign aspect. The remaining 35 per cent, among whom the Irish, the American with 10 per cent, and the German nationalities predominate, are interspersed chiefly on the northern side of the blocks, along Second street.

Rival attractions to the railroads, factories and docks, which claim so large a part of the population in the other two districts, are here offered by the dump-grounds adjacent. Irregular heavy laboring work is, however, the predominating occupation among the Italians, though the rag-picker and junk-dealer are frequently found, as well as the omnipresent factory hand.

So much for the characteristics of the separate districts. For the remainder of the paper, the houses will be dealt with, in the main, without regard to district lines. Some preliminary classifications may properly be given before more detailed points of construction and sanitation are taken up, or special evils pointed out.

First of all, classifying the 504 houses by materials, we find that just 55 per cent are of wood, and 45 per cent of brick—a few of the former having brick, and a few of the latter stone, fronts. If we group them by the number of stories, three-story and three-story-and-basement houses are found to lead with 54 per cent; four and four-story-and-basement houses come next with 31 per cent; 5 per cent have five stories; the remaining 10 per cent have either two stories or two stories and basement, with the exception of two houses, one and one-half stories and one-story-and-basement respectively.

Again, we may group the houses by the number of apartments contained. Houses occupied by but one family were not touched in the investigation, but sixty-three two-family houses were examined, leaving 431 houses which contain accommodations for three families or more, thus falling under the definition of a tenement house most generally accepted throughout the country. Three-apartment houses are most common, 25 per cent of the total number falling under this head; 58 per cent have from four to nine apartments; of houses containing ten apartments or more there are twenty-three, or 4 per cent.

Another significant classification of houses is that by position

on the lot. Fourteen per cent of the houses investigated are rear houses. These figures, however, give little idea of the actual aspect of things, as two blocks are without any rear houses, and six others have but one or two each, while in one block rear houses constitute no less than 40 per cent of all. These houses are seldom over three stories in height, are almost always of wood, are in general very old and frequently dilapidated.

Turning now from classifications of the houses themselves to consider the apartments they contain, we find that three-room apartments lead by a wide margin, constituting 41 per cent of the total of 2,154. Next come four-room apartments with 28 per cent; two-room apartments with 12 per cent; five-room apartments with 7 per cent; six-room apartments with 4 per cent. Of one-room apartments there is less than 1 per cent. One per cent of the apartments examined contained over six rooms.

If now, leaving these preliminary statistics, we turn to matters of greater interest, we shall find it convenient to group the chief evils found, as first, evils of construction, under which we shall speak only of the two leading faults, lack of proper provision for escape in case of fire, and inadequate lighting and ventilation; next, sanitary evils, some of which are structural and some the result of natural conditions or neglect; and lastly, evils of occupancy, chief among which is that of overcrowded apartments.

The absence of fire-escapes is perhaps the most conspicuous and glaring fault observable in the tenement houses of Jersey City. Of the twenty-four five-story buildings found, just one-half were provided with fire-escapes; while of the 155 four-story or four-story-and-basement houses, only four were so equipped. After these figures it will hardly surprise anyone to learn that in no case was a fire-escape found upon a three-story house. There are thus out of a total of 431 tenement houses, most of them three stories or more in height, but sixteen, or 3 per cent, which are provided with fire-escapes of any kind.

The character of the fire-escapes found makes them in a number of cases practically valueless. The balconies of five had wooden floors; and not only in a large proportion of cases were balconies seriously encumbered and stairway or ladder openings covered by tenants, but in two instances trap doors were regularly fitted to these openings, the owner thus encouraging the use of the balcony as a general catch-all and storage place. Furthermore,

in only three houses did all the apartments above the ground floor have access to a balcony, while in one instance, but one out of four families was provided with such means of egress. No form of fire-proof construction was anywhere found, even the dumb-waiter shafts in the higher buildings, well known to be one of the most common paths by which fire spreads, being almost without exception of wood.

In regard to lighting and ventilation, the facts are less easily grouped. The buildings being seldom of a depth to encroach seriously upon the yards, we find, with the exception of a very few of the higher houses, that nearly all of the kitchens and general living-rooms open upon the yard or street and are thus adequately lighted. In the converted dwellings, and in all houses occupied by but one family on each floor, a large proportion of bedrooms also are open to the outer air. But in the three or four story buildings erected originally for tenement uses, and furnishing accommodations for two families or more on a floor, a light bedroom is more nearly the exception than the rule. The typical interior room is lighted by a window to the outer living-room or a public hall, these windows seldom having more than five square feet of glazed surface, and more frequently an area of from three to four square feet. One thousand and eighty-four such rooms were noted in the course of the investigation; while—a still more serious evil—399 rooms were found which had no window at all, and in most cases not even a transom opening into another room.

Light and air shafts were found in only a small proportion of the tenement houses investigated; and a light and air shaft which is more than the merest travesty of its respectable name is emphatically an exception. The typical shaft is a triangular or oblong niche in the outer wall, with an area of from five to twenty square feet; an occasional variation being found in a square shaft of about the same area, let into the interior of the house and covered in most cases by a skylight. Below the top story such shafts furnish practically no light, while tenants bore almost unvarying witness that windows upon them were uniformly kept closed. A single whiff of the pent-up air within their narrow walls is quite sufficient to convince one of the wisdom of such disregard of their presence; and one feels no surprise in reading the evidence of chemists and physicians as to the positive injury to health wrought by pretended ventilation of this sort—evidence which has led to the

giving of the suggestive name of culture tubes to such shafts. Among evils of sanitation only a few of the most serious can be touched upon. Most conspicuous and widespread of all is that of the foul and ill-smelling privy vault. Seventy-five per cent of the houses investigated furnish no toilet accommodations save these objectionable structures in the yard. The vaults are in the main sewer-connected, one block and part of another in District III being the only sections in which no street sewer is laid, though unsewered vaults were found in small numbers elsewhere. But a sewer connection is in a large proportion of cases a most illusory blessing. The great mass of solid matter frequently remains after the liquids have run off to the sewer, and its decomposition renders the air of the yard, upon which the rear rooms depend, many times almost intolerable. In two cases school-sinks—modified privies, with metal vaults in which water stands—were discovered in cellars; but as the water was changed, according to the testimony of tenants, but once a week, these cannot be said to offer many advantages over the ordinary privy. Among the 368 water-closets in use in the remaining houses, the old and objectionable pan closets number sixty-one; while numerous water-closet compartments are either entirely unventilated or have windows only to halls or rooms, and in a number of cases, especially on the top floor of five-story buildings, the water-flush is wholly inadequate to cleanse the bowl.

A serious evil is also found in the location and condition of household sinks. In seventy of the houses investigated all such sinks were located in the public hall, while in fifty-five other houses sinks were so located on one or more floors. Nearly every such sink is used by two families. In one block, chosen at haphazard from those of the Italian district, sixty apartments were found whose occupants were obliged so to share their sink; while fifteen other apartments were provided with but one sink to every three or four apartments. Furthermore, eight houses were found in which, in flat defiance of a city ordinance, no water at all was furnished indoors. One row of four such houses, containing in all twenty-two apartments, was provided with but two hydrants in the common yard, one hydrant serving for ten, the other for twelve apartments.

The collection of statistics as to the plumbing of sinks was not at first attempted, but was taken up as the result of an observation

of conditions in the earlier blocks investigated. Eleven hundred and sixty-two sinks, located in four blocks of District I, and in the six blocks of Districts II and III, were examined. Of these only 10 per cent were properly trapped and vented; 68 per cent were trapped but not vented—a far from satisfactory state of affairs, especially where as in many cases traps were so small or otherwise defective as to be practically useless; 10 per cent were neither trapped nor vented, the pipes thus offering free passage to the contaminated sewer air; 12 per cent were boarded up solidly, so that the waste-pipes could not be examined—an almost sure sign that the concealed plumbing is of the oldest and worst type.

One serious element in the insanitary conditions of the districts investigated, which, unlike those just mentioned, cannot primarily be charged to the householder, is found in the character of the land upon which a large part of lower Jersey City is built. Only six of the sixteen blocks investigated are composed entirely of original solid ground. Five blocks in District I were in greater or less degree formed by the filling in of marsh land or the extension of the water front. All of District II, and nearly all of two blocks of District III, were so formed.¹

The significance of these facts appears when we realize that land so made is largely intermingled with refuse matter, and, still more important, is generally damp and is subject to periodic risings of tidewater. In a large proportion of the houses built upon such land, observations of the investigator, supplemented by the testimony of tenants, proves that the water in cellars unprotected, as are nearly all, by water-proof flooring, stands at times to a depth of several inches. Sewage is thus frequently washed back into yards and cellars, first-floor apartments are rendered damp and unhealthful, and nauseating odors suggest the serious danger to health which such a condition brings upon the entire house. Fortunately the cellar-dwelling evil is not a prevalent one in Jersey City; yet one instance is recalled where a family paying for four rooms in the basement and first floor had been obliged to vacate the lower two rooms entirely—the men of the family wading through water knee-deep to rescue the kitchen stove.

One of the most serious evils from which the poorer classes suffer is that of overcrowded apartments. As was anticipated

¹ See topographical map prepared for the National Board of Health in 1880 by Spielman & Brush. The only copy known to exist is in the Jersey City Public Library.

from the facts brought to light by investigations in other American cities, this evil was found to be most prevalent among the poorest foreign population, especially the Poles and Italians, and is largely due to the custom of taking so called boarders—really, in most cases, lodgers, who provide their own bedding and pay in the neighborhood of two dollars a month.

There are two ways of measuring overcrowding in apartments; by number of individuals per room, and by cubic air space per individual. To secure perfectly accurate results, it is of course necessary to discover just how many rooms in a given apartment are occupied for sleeping purposes and how many persons sleep in each. This may seem a simple matter, but in practice reliable results are not only very difficult, but in many cases impossible to secure, save by a night inspection. Not only must allowance be made for very general under-statement of the number of boarders taken, but in a large proportion of cases either no answers at all or wholly unsatisfactory answers can be obtained to questions as to the distribution of members of the family and of boarders at night. Under these circumstances it has seemed best, instead of attempting to state the number of individuals sleeping in each room and the precise cubic air space afforded by that room to each, to give the ratio of number of occupants to entire number of rooms in each apartment, and the cubic air space per individual afforded by that apartment as a whole. Only rough indications of the degree of overcrowding at night are of course given by this method, but it has at least the advantage of greater accuracy so far as it goes than could fairly be claimed for one seemingly more precise.

Applying the method of measurement by cubic air space to the 2,154 apartments investigated, we find that in 65 per cent of them each occupant has an allowance of 600 cubic feet of air or more. Living conditions in most of these apartments are fair, and in many good; yet some of the most disgraceful cases of overcrowding were found among them—as in one apartment, where in a single large room two little girls of about twelve years slept, together with a varying number of male boarders. The remaining 35 per cent of apartments afford less than 600 cubic feet of air space per occupant. This means in nearly all cases a serious degree of overcrowding; since if bedrooms alone are occupied at night such an allowance for the whole apartment means actually on an average less than 400 cubic feet, and often less than 300 or even 200 cubic feet for each person; while if the crowding compels the use of the kitchen for sleeping

purposes, other evils hardly less serious are added to those of limited air space. Such being the meaning of the figures given, it becomes evident that in the 199 apartments, 9 per cent of all, in which there were found to be less than 400 cubic feet of air space to each occupant in the apartment as a whole, very serious danger to health exists. It is below the limit of 400 cubic feet per adult, with a smaller allowance for children, that government interference has generally been authorized, where authorized at all; as is notably the case in Glasgow, where the law is enforced by an especially efficient system of night inspection, and among American cities in New York.

The other test of overcrowding, by ratio of number of persons to number of rooms, while a less accurate means of estimating effect on health, furnishes a more accurate indication of the relation of overcrowding to standards of decency. An example typical of many cases met with will make this distinction clear. Suppose two large high-ceiled rooms with a total cubic contents of 3,500 cubic feet, occupied by eight people. Each person has then more than the minimum of 400 cubic feet; yet the absence of any possibility of privacy or decency of living involved where men and women boarders, parents and growing children make up the eight, need not be dwelt upon. It is evident that four rooms with an aggregate contents of less than 3,200 cubic feet might be occupied by the same eight persons with perhaps greater danger to health from limited breathing space, but with certainly better opportunities for separation by sexes.

If we apply this second method of measurement, we find that in 24 per cent of the total number of apartments there are two persons or more to each room. Such apartments may fairly be classed as overcrowded; since either every room is occupied for sleeping purposes, or if one room is reserved for kitchen and living-room, the bedrooms are shared by a minimum average of two and two-thirds, three or four persons each, according as the number of rooms in the apartment is four, three or two.¹ To appreciate what this means it is of course necessary to realize that few bedrooms in such apartments contain more than 800 cubic feet, while a large proportion are dark interior rooms containing from 600 to 400 cubic feet or even less. These facts having been pointed out, it is unnecessary further to emphasize the seriousness of the state of affairs, where, as in 196 apartments, 9 per cent of the total num-

¹ Very little overcrowding was found in apartments of more than four rooms.

ber, the ratio of number of occupants to number of rooms rises as high as 2.5 or more.

Space will not permit of an extended comparison of these conditions of overcrowding with those revealed by similar investigations in other cities. It is interesting, however, to note in passing that the average number of individuals per room in the districts investigated is higher than the average number of occupants per room in the 9,859 apartments covered by the recent investigation of the City Homes Association in Chicago; the former being 1.35, and the latter 1.28 persons. While averages do not form the most satisfactory basis of comparison, a difference so marked as this unquestionably indicates a greater degree of overcrowding in the Jersey City than in the Chicago districts.

Enough has been said, it is believed, to show that serious housing problems demand solution in Jersey City. While the investigation covered the living environment of but 10,179 persons out of a total city population of 206,433, it may yet fairly claim to have some representative value. The districts investigated of course present conditions different in some respects from those of the city as a whole. Thus—to use a method of comparison too rough to have any but a suggestive value—while but 28 per cent of the total population of the city are foreigners, 84 per cent of the heads of families whose apartments were investigated are foreign-born. Along with this large proportion of the poorest foreign population go unquestionably especially bad conditions of overcrowding, and in many respects of sanitary neglect; though such is not the case with faults of housing construction pure and simple. Nevertheless the accusation that an unfairly dark and harrowing picture has been presented cannot justly be brought; since on the one hand many tenement houses of the best type were included, as is shown by a range of monthly rents between extremes of \$17 and \$3 per apartment; while on the other, large numbers of blocks as bad in character as any of those investigated could be pointed out in other parts of the city. The hope of furnishing data upon which a movement for reform might safely base its demands was the determining incentive to the investigation; but this direct practical aim has by no means obscured the sociological and scientific interests involved. If the results obtained shall on the one hand be used as a point of departure for social effort, and on the other be judged a real though small contribution to the literature of the housing problem, the ends sought will have been fully attained.